



## Conference Paper

# Art Text as a Cultural Code of the XIXth Century China in an Age of Transition (The Case of the Haishang School of Painting)

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## Abstract

The article explores the paintings of the Haishang school of Chinese painting as an artistic text of the XIXth-century culture. This provides with the argument in favor of the semiotic approach that underlies this research.

**Keywords:** cultural art text, cultural code, XIXth-century Chinese culture, semiotic approach, Haishang school, symbol, image

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## 1. Introduction

When describing a mode of organization of the artistic text, a famous Russian cultural theorist and linguist Yuri Lotman developed a theory that interpreted a work of art as an image/model of cultural activity reflecting the universals governing the people's existence in their particular type of culture (everyday behavior, thinking, life meaning and values, creativity) [2, p. 15]. Talking about what constitutes art, Lotman says that art often may be understood as a 'magnificently organized generator' of cultural text [6, p. 21]. Since the work of art, as a self-actualization of culture, reflects a concrete type of artistic consciousness, expresses a concrete cultural and historical type of human life, as well as responds to all changes in cultural and social life, art can preserve a holistic image of an entire historical era. This is the aspect that we explore in this article.

To perform cultural analysis of an artistic text, it is important to turn to the Ernst Cassirer's *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* ('Philosophy of the Symbolic Forms') [4]. It is an influential work, in which Cassirer became one of the first authors of the early XXth century to discover an importance of the symbolic perception of reality. The semiotic impact and value of Cassirer's methodology is found in his idea that the world

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is grasped by the 'human spirit as a whole' – that is, not only through reason and logic, but also through senses and perceptions, imbued with the entire sphere of motivations and functions. According to Cassirer, only the 'spirit as a whole' provides us with the concept of a real world and creates culture. 'According to Cassirer, it is a symbol that creates an ideal connection in this system of diverse manifestations of the "human spirit as a whole" (mythology, religion, art, science, etc.)' [8, p. 7]. A symbol, therefore, is an expression of 'synthesis in multitude', a unity of 'meaning and senses'; 'a human being lives in a symbolic universe' (Cassirer), which includes linguistic expressions, artworks, myths, religion, and scientific concepts. All of this determines human life to such an extent that we become self-aware only through the symbols, by creating a culture. Russian scholar M. Bakhtin wrote that the 'images of man's assertion of himself in the world' enter the cultural text as symbols. Different images exist in science, art, philosophy and other cultural forms, since these forms have different meanings [1].

Artistic cultural texts are often symbolical; however, artists may choose between the symbolic and the figurative ways to express an idea. However, these forms are not mutually exclusive and can combine within the same artistic work. Let us now explore the source and the logic of such combinations based on the works of the XIXth-century Chinese artists.

## 2. Artistic Cultural Texts of the Chinese Haishang School

In traditional Chinese bird-and-flower painting, artists – and Haishang artists as well – valued 'the four perfections': bamboo, plum flowers, orchids and pines. These plants are interpreted as the important symbols of higher human qualities: the bamboo is stubborn and patient, plum flowers are proud and independent, orchids are scrupulously honest, and pines are strong.

This reminds us that the traditional Chinese painting was closely connected to the Chinese philosophy. Under the influence of Confucianism, painting became a unique tool for ethical and spiritual self-improvement and for the holistic personal development. In this context, the painting's goal was to create a socially ideal person [7, p. 43]. Taoist ideas compelled artists to escape from the social reality by relocating to the woods, where they turned their attention to nature. At the same time, Zen Buddhism urged artists 'to forget individuality and outside world'. It is important to remember that, until the XIXth century, Chinese authorities followed an isolationist policy regarding outside cultural influences. Therefore, traditional Chinese artists paid

little attention to social realities and existed in an internal spiritual world unconcerned with the life of the society.

After 1842 – that is, after the end of the so-called Opium wars – China found itself in the semi-colonial and semi-feudal situation. This was the turning point for the Chinese society [3, p. 375]. Capitalism took off; ethnic conflicts and class tensions that were widespread in China arose more and more often. It was a period marked by a widespread revolutionary mood. During the reign of the ninth Emperor Xianfeng (1850–1861), rebellions that lasted until the end of the Qing Dynasty, led to the development of Shanghai as the largest trade city in Jiangnan. Many artists from various cities moved to Shanghai. It becomes a meeting point for all talented artists, whose works stimulate the flowering of the Chinese painting and form the Haishang school, the most important Chinese school of painting in the latter half of the XIXth century. The influence of this school was deeply felt in the Chinese society, creating a basis for blending of Chinese and Western cultures. To adapt to their new environments, all of them, to a varying degree, changed their style and artistic ideas. The works of the Haingshan school artists were characterized by their aesthetics and accessibility, their sophisticated urban and secular style. The artists of this school introduced new themes and images influenced by the Western art. These new themes were familiar and popular among ordinary urban residents. Therefore, their paintings were accessible to everybody, allowing common people to understand the beauty of art and meditate on its mysteries.

The works of Haishang school use images to explore social issues and the lives of ordinary people. For example, Zhao Zhiqian used the image of 'Zhong Kui' to depict the dark side of power and the bureaucrats' complete futility in satisfying people's needs. In Huian Qian's 'Zhong Kui', the title character has blue eyes and a red nose, referring to an image of a foreign invader and condemning the aggressors' brutality. In his 'Zhong Kui' picture, Ren Bonian tells about the battle pride of his country. Therefore, in different pictures the image of Zhong Kui is interpreted as a symbol of a bureaucrat, a foreign invader, and a patriotic warrior.

Despite the influences of Western Realism evident in the works of Chinese artists, their pictures employ the symbols of traditional Chinese painting. We find them, for example, in Ren Bonian's 'Herding the Sheep – Su Shi' ('Su Shi Mun Yang'), 'The Seamstress' ('Fang Zhin Piung'), 'Watching the Sky When Hungry' ('Di Kan Tian Tu') and 'The Picture of a Poor Soldier' ('Suan Han Wei'), and Wang Yiting's 'Picture of Refugees'.

Thus, artistic cultural text of XIXth-century China, in particular works by Haishang school, use both images and symbols to enhance their vision of the world through the artists' national and ethnic expressions.

Images and symbols, so important for the cultural art texts, can be viewed through the concepts developed by Erwin Panofsky. E.Panofsky understood symbol as 'a general cultural-philosophical category that includes image, sign and picture', as well as the 'cultural forms and phenomena' [5].

### 3. Preliminary Conclusions

Summing up our short exploration of the problems of cultural art text based on the XIXth-century Chinese Haishang school of painting, we may say that this example supports an interpretation of the cultural art text as a cultural code of its unique time period.

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